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Officials Try to Discredit POW Reports

Veterans Day is an appropriate occasion to remind Americans once again that nearly 2,500 U.S. military men remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia 10 years after the war ended. Some of them are almost certainly alive—on the authority of no less than the president's national security adviser.

Yet for all its bold talk, the Reagan regime has done little more than previous administrations to help these men in their unimaginable agony. The Defense Intelligence Agency, while professing great concern about reported sightings of live American prisoners in Vietnam and Laos, has systematically tried either to squelch the reports or discredit them.

According to our sources, the Pentagon has received more than 400 reports since 1981 of live American prisoners. The Defense Intelligence Agency has been unable to discredit more than 100 of these eyewitness reports, even counting some pre-1981 sightings. Supposedly, they are still under investigation.

Granted, this administration, like its predecessors, is in a frustrating position. The Vietnamese flatly deny that they have American prisoners-of-war. Faced with this official obstinacy, the White House's only option seems to be a Rambo-style raid to liberate the POWs. But the intelligence information isn't up-to-date enough to guarantee a fair chance of success, even if the administration were willing to risk such an operation.

Rather than acknowledge its impotence, the Pentagon resorts to a shameful game of semantics over the word "evidence." Unable to deny that sightings have been reported, the military simply challenges the reliability of the evidence, demanding proof or corroboration that is impossible to get.

There's a double standard at work. We made a careful study of the live-sighting reports; then compared them with the top-secret reports that give evidence of Soviet arms-control violations.

The sources of information are similar in both cases: "humint," or human intelligence from refugees and other eyewitnesses, supplemented by spy satellite data. No one has come up with an official Vietnamese document acknowledging the existence of American POWs; but then, no one has come up with an official Soviet document admitting arms treaty violations, either.

But the comparison makes clear that the White House has accepted far flimsier evidence on arms-control breaches—sometimes even called "strong evidence" in the reports—than it is willing to accept on live POWs.

Indeed, national security affairs adviser Robert C. McFarlane made a startling admission last month in remarks that he thought were off the record. A former congressman (and staunch conservative) taped and released the remarks.

"I think there have to be live Americans there," said McFarlane, stressing that this was only his personal opinion. He paid obeisance to the official line that the evidence wasn't conclusive, but then said: "There is quite a lot of evidence given by people who have no ulterior motives and no reason to lie, and they're telling things that they have seen."

McFarlane said the administration hasn't done enough to gather intelligence on those missing. "And that's bad," he said. "That's a failure."

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